



Summary

The contemporary civilization is aiming to give us “pleasure and comfort” and eliminate “pain and suffering” as much as possible. This is evident especially in advanced countries. The contemporary civilization is moving toward a “painless civilization.” However, in a painless civilization, we are deprived of the joy of life, which is considered a fundamental source of our meaning of life, and we are led to the situation of drowning in a sea of pleasure. This is a kind of dystopia, but we cannot find an easy way to escape from it. It is important to pay special attention to this aspect of contemporary civilization when we think about the future of our planet.

The Dark Side of Painless Civilization

A Philosophical Investigation into Human Desire

Prof. Masahiro Morioka

“Painless civilization” is a term I coined in my Japanese book of the same title published in 2003. The contemporary civilization is aiming to give us “pleasure and comfort” and eliminate “pain and suffering” as much as possible. This is evident especially in advanced countries. The contemporary civilization is moving toward a “painless civilization.” However, in a painless civilization, we are deprived of the joy of life, which is considered a fundamental source of our meaning of life, and we are led to the situation of drowning in a sea of pleasure. This is a kind of dystopia, but we cannot find an easy way to escape from it. It is important to pay special attention to this aspect of contemporary civilization when we think about the future of our planet.

In the 1980s, I studied the ethics of global environmental problems. I read many books that argued that one of the fundamental causes of today’s environmental crisis was global capitalism. Then I saw that some of those books became bestsellers in Japan driven by the power of capitalism. I was surprised that the books that criticized the movement of global capitalism were printed in large numbers and worked as a driving force for advancing the movement of capitalism itself. I thought something new was happening here. I sensed this was a problem that should be examined from a civilizational perspective.

A painless civilization is a civilization in which the system of enhancing “pleasure and comfort” and eliminating “pain and suffering” extends to every corner of society. Today’s society has not reached this stage, but it is certain that the contemporary civilization is heading toward a painless civilization. We can see the signs of a painless civilization here and there in many cities in advanced countries. It is very hard to criticize painless civilization because an act of criticism is to be utilized by a painless civilization itself as a tool for further advancing its movement.

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In order to better understand painless civilization, let us take a look at the history of our civilization. Painless civilization is an evolutionary form of self-domestication. So, what is self-domestication? Self-domestication is a concept proposed by Egon von Eickstedt in the 1930s. He argued that humans domesticated not only animals but also themselves in the process of forming human civilizations. This means that humans have modified themselves in the same manner as they have modified animals such as goats and sheep.

I proposed the hypothesis that there is a very basic desire inside human beings, that is, the “desire of the body,” and it drove humans to domesticate themselves. The desire of the body has five aspects:

Desire of the Body

- ✓ Seek pleasure and avoid pain.
- ✓ Maintain the current state of affairs and plan for stability.
- ✓ Expand and increase itself if there is an opening.
- ✓ Sacrifice other people.
- ✓ Control lives, life, and nature.

The desire of the body is deeply imprinted into our human life. We cannot easily escape from this desire.

A painless civilization is a civilization whose movement is driven by five aspects of the “desire of the body” that are inscribed into the deepest layer of our existence.

Let us look at these five aspects one by one.

Firstly, in a painless civilization, we seek pleasure and comfort and avoid pain and suffering. Social systems that support those actions extend into every corner of our society.

Secondly, in a painless civilization, we maintain the current state of affairs if it is considered to be beneficial to us, and we seek to protect the stability of this state.

Thirdly, in a painless civilization, we seek to expand our territory and sphere of influence if there is a chance.

Fourthly, in a painless civilization, we sometimes seek benefits by sacrificing others, and we close our eyes to such exploitative actions. Many technologies that help turn our eyes from them are invented.

Fifthly, in a painless civilization, we control our lives’ itineraries, we control the life and death of creatures including humans, and we control the natural environment as much as possible. This control is made possible by scientific and

social technologies. This is the most important characteristic of a painless civilization.

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Technologies in a painless civilization have at least three important characteristics, namely: 1) preventive pain elimination, 2) double-controlled structures, and 3) pain elimination devices.

The first is “preventive pain elimination.” This is a preventive or preemptive action that seeks to eliminate future pain before it actually emerges. In the book *Painless Civilization* I wrote, “This is a system that not only eliminates suffering that already exists but carefully predicts suffering that could arise to threaten us in the future and preventatively eradicates here and now whatever seems likely to be a cause of this future suffering” (p. 30). A good example is cancer examinations. After receiving a cancer checkup, if a sign of early cancer is found, we can quickly remove it. This is a typical action of preventive pain elimination.

Another example is selective abortion. Today we can test amniotic fluid and see whether a fetus has severe disabilities, and if it has, we can abort it under certain conditions. This technology can also be applied to fertilized eggs that are artificially made outside a woman’s body. Eggs that have disabilities will simply be discarded. The number of human traits that can be tested is expected to radically increase in the future. A painless civilization is a civilization where these kinds of technologies can be found here and there in our society.



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At first sight, it is unclear what the problem with preventive pain elimination is.

The problem will arise when technologies for preventive pain elimination have accumulated in our society. In such a society, we are supposed to be surrounded by a variety of preventive pain elimination technologies simultaneously, and we will realize, for the first time, that we are deprived of the possibility of encountering otherness and making ourselves reborn, which is very important for us to live our life in an authentic way.

However, painless civilization is clever. It deceives us by using double-controlled structures. So, what is a double-controlled structure?

A double-controlled structure is a structure that a painless civilization creates in our society. A painless civilization never tries to wipe out all pain and suffering from our lives. It seeks to eliminate pain and suffering from a society as a whole, but at the same time, it intentionally leaves small pain and suffering in small corners of our society, and even positively brings our attention to them. A painless civilization positively leaves room for us to be able to enjoy small pain and the expectation of risks there.

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A good example is human-centered, wise control of the environment, in which we can enjoy the wilderness and the sense of risk of losing our lives in untamed nature, whereas in reality, we never lose our lives and seldom injure ourselves because the natural environment in the area is wisely controlled as a whole by painless technologies. And because these painless technologies are sophisticatedly hidden under the controlled environment, we do not usually recognize their existence during the period we enjoy the natural environment there. This is the goal of the environmental protection in the age of painless civilization.

Imagine a huge amusement park in which we can enjoy the wilderness and the violence of nature here and there, but in reality, no one dies or is injured inside that park. We can enjoy the experience of a flood but we never die of a true

flood in that park. A nature park that extends on a global scale is the goal of the environmental protection that is to be advanced by a painless civilization. I call it “double-controlled structure”: Here and there we can encounter the uncontrolled violence of nature, but true dangers are almost completely suppressed by technologies.

Inside double-controlled structures, we are encouraged to actively enjoy the sense of risk, and experience pain and accidents in nature, and at the same time we are allowed to forget the fact that the whole system is skillfully controlled. This shows that a painless civilization never seeks to eliminate all the pain and suffering we encounter in our daily lives. On the contrary, it makes us concentrate on that nonsevere pain, and in exchange for it, it makes us forget the fact that the whole system is sophisticatedly controlled.

In other words, a double-controlled structure is a structure in which people’s freedom to escape control from society is secured in small parts of society, whereas in a society as a whole such freedom is almost completely controlled. In addition, a painless civilization further tries to deceive us by using pain elimination devices. So, what is a pain elimination device?

A pain elimination device is a device that seeks to eliminate pain and suffering from our lives, and make us forget the fact that we are being controlled by a painless civilization’s double-controlled structures. Painkillers, alcohol, and narcotics can work as pain elimination devices at the physical level. At the psychological level, psychotherapy and religion can work as pain elimination devices that reduce our mental and spiritual pain.

But the most important devices are: 1) mass media, 2) discourses that influence our way of thinking, and 3) entertainment industries such as TV shows, movies, dramas, and music that can divert our attention from the vague anxieties of life that we sometimes feel in a society moving toward a painless civilization. They circulate various moving stories of love and compassion and argue that although it is true that living in this society is still full of pain and suffering, we will be able to finally reach a state of happiness and fulfillment through the power of love and compassion. And finally we are guided towards the opinion that the basic framework of



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painless civilization does not have to be altered, and there is no problem living there.

A painless civilization is a civilization that encourages us to seek pleasure and comfort and eliminate pain and suffering, maintain a current framework that is beneficial to us, and control our life course so that it can proceed in the way we have planned beforehand. What is missing here is the possibility of our rebirth after experiencing unpredicted grave suffering. In our lives, we sometimes encounter unpredicted grave suffering: We may lose a beloved family member, we may have severe disabilities in a traffic accident, our business may fail and leave us without money, or our children may commit a significant crime.

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In such a case, we are thrown to the bottom of our life. We think that our life is over and there is no way out from there. We experience huge pain and scream in agony. However, sometimes, a very strange thing occurs to us. After having gone through such pain, the psychological framework we have strongly maintained is dismantled and a new framework, or a new view of life that has been unknown to us, appears in front of us. The place that we have considered to be a hell becomes another good place to live in. A huge reformation of our worldview occurs to us. We are reborn at the bottom of our life. We feel an unexpected sense of joy.

I have called this kind of unexpected joy, which we feel after going through huge suffering, the “joy of life.” And this “joy of life” is one of the indispensable ingredients for us to be able to lead an authentic and meaningful life. Because we are not robots that maintain the same framework

throughout our life, this kind of rebirth experience plays an extremely important role in our lives. Without the “joy of life,” many of us are going to feel suffocated as if we were drowning in a sea of sugar.

The central problem of painless civilization is that it systematically erases this “joy of life” from the lives of people living there.

There is no prescription for dismantling the negative side of a painless civilization. This is because if there were such a prescription, a painless civilization would jump on it and spread the discourse of the prescription throughout society as an attractive commodity, and by doing that a painless civilization would try to reduce the power of dismantling. An argument alone will not solve the problem of painless civilization. We must be careful lest our argument be utilized by a painless civilization.

Reference

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About the Author

Masahiro Morioka, a professor of philosophy and ethics at Waseda University in Japan, is considered to be one of the most influential thinkers in the current Japanese philosophical community. He specializes in philosophy of life, life studies, bioethics, gender studies, and criticism of contemporary civilization.

He completed his BA and MA in Ethics at the University of Tokyo; his PhD in Human science at Osaka Prefecture University. He is the writer of many books mainly in Japanese language. His latest book titled “*Painless Civilization 1: A Philosophical Critique of Desire*” is translated into many languages, including Turkish under the title of *Acısız Medeniyet*. He is the director of Tokyo Philosophy Project, and the editor-in-chief of *Journal of Philosophy of Life*.



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ABOUT THE PROJECT

Imagining A Common Horizon for Humanity and the Planet

The world is passing through an extremely troubled period in its history, with a seemingly new challenge encountered at every turn. Serious economic, social, cultural, environmental and political crises at a global level are exacerbated by those being felt in individual countries. The challenges we are facing take a variety of forms, from financial collapses to climate change, from international terrorism to regional conflicts, and from the refugee problem to xenophobia.

All of these crises are being aggravated by the impact of the pandemic, revealing the inability of humanity to tackle them collectively, and invalidating the romantic discourse of globalization. As history continues its march, we are reminded that the answer to the common problems of humanity cannot be found by becoming more introverted, polarized or prejudiced. No matter how severe our problems, our destiny should not be seen as unchangeable. The problems we experience are primarily a result of human activity, and can be overcome only through human effort, but we should remain aware that there are many different hurdles to be passed if we are to rid ourselves of the crises being experienced in many parts of the world.

Only through conscious, patient and collective effort can we overcome the problems of humanity. Now is the time for dignified people from the different cultures and geographies of the world to come together in solidarity. It is time to speak with full respect of human dignity, setting aside the importance we place in our individual identities. An alliance of people who see truth and justice as the major pillars of our kind, will be able to open the door to a new era of solidarity for humanity. A dignified future is possible. We believe that Turkey holds a special, if not privileged, position, based on its geographical, historical and cultural characteristics, and can serve as a host to this joint effort of humanity.

Our goal within the scope of this project is to bring together the leading thinkers of the world, to create an international intellectual platform that draws its strength from human dignity, and that aims to build for the future of humanity and the planet with a holistic synergy with a view to offering humanity a common horizon. As Cappadocia University, our vision in this regard is to provide an academic platform from where esteemed intellectuals from around the world can share their visions for a common future of humanity and our planet, and to comment on the challenges and opportunities they envisage.

You can find detailed information about the Project at <https://commonhorizon.kapadokya.edu.tr/en/>

Cappadocia University (<https://kapadokya.edu.tr/en/>) is a young foundation (private) university in central Turkey, Cappadocia. The main goal of the university is to raise generations of opinion leaders who can read the 21st century realistically, and whose views therefore carry weight and significance – go-to men and women who are highly knowledgeable in their fields, who are happy to share their knowledge, and who will thus be respected and trusted by others. Cappadocia University is home to a highly successful dual-pronged system of academic and vocational programs that act in support of each other.

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